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The Secret War Of a Green Beret

By Philip Taubman

The first call came on a muggy July evening in 1977. Luke Thompson, a master sergeant in the Army Special Forces, was at home in Fayetteville, N.C. The caller identified himself as Pat Loomis from Washington and asked if Thompson might be interested in recruiting a team of former Green Berets for an overseas mission that would pay well. Loomis provided no other information. Thompson conditionally accepted the proposal, not knowing that he was about to become involved in one of the strangest and most disturbing operations in the annals of international espionage.

When the conversation with Loomis ended, Thompson, who says he was initially concerned that the offer might be a trap by a hostile foreign intelligence service, phoned military intelligence officers at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, headquarters of the Special Forces, to report the call and to seek their guidance. Two officers drove to his house, according to Thompson, and the three men spent the evening discussing the operation.

The next day, Loomis called again and told Thompson he wanted to arrange a meeting the following day in Fayetteville. They agreed to meet at the Sheraton Motor Inn. The day of the meeting, Thompson recalls, he was informed by the military intelligence officers that they had checked the offer "to the top" and found it was "legal and aboveboard." They told him, "You can pursue it as you desire," he says. Later, at the Sheraton, Loomis identified himself as a covert agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. Less than a week later, Thompson — who had been granted a leave by his commanding officers — and three former Green Berets he had recruited were in Libya. Their mission: to train terrorists.

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Five years later, the Libyan operation remains a subject of mystery, controversy and investigation. The organizers of the mission, Edwin P. Wilson and Frank E. Terpil, both former American intelligence agents, were indicted by a Federal grand jury in 1980 on charges of illegally shipping explosives to Libya as part of the terrorist training operation. Wilson was recently caught in an international trap set by the Justice Department and he is now being held in the Washington area pending trial, with bail set at \$20 million. Terpil remains a fugitive, at last report living in Beirut. Shortly before his meeting with Thompson, Pat Loomis had been dismissed by the C.I.A. for helping Wilson; but because of administrative procedures Loomis was still on the agency's payroll when he contacted Thompson. The Central Intelligence Agency has repeatedly denied authorizing or supporting the operation, but some sources suggest that senior agency officials who were close to Wilson may have given approval to the Libyan scheme, perhaps in the hope it would produce valuable intelligence information on Libyan terrorism. There is also a possibility, which Federal prosecutors are exploring, that the same senior C.I.A. officials might have been silent business partners of Wilson. Federal prosecutors in Washington, Houston, Denver and several other cities are still investigating various aspects of the case and additional indictments are said to be likely this year.

Of the many riddles that arise from these events, one of the most difficult to solve may be this: Why did a group of former Green Berets, men who were trained to be America's elite commando troops and who consider themselves unwavering American patriots, accept an offer to train terrorists for a hostile foreign government? The men themselves say the

The money was good (they say they were promised \$6,500 a month), the action was appealing and, at least as important, they claim that they were firmly convinced that they were enlisting in an officially sanctioned American mission to infiltrate the Libyan intelligence apparatus. But was there something about these men, the training they had received and the tasks they had carried out in the past that discouraged them from questioning what was clearly a questionable mission? Had they become so accustomed to accepting unsavory assignments from shadowy sources of authority that they saw nothing unusual or suspicious in being sent by the United States Government to aid an anti-American dictator? And was there something about the organization of the American intelligence system, particularly the relationship between the C.I.A. and the Green Berets, that encouraged agents to operate without clear lines of authority?

Since the mid-1970's, the nation has known that the Government has conducted questionable operations overseas, including assassinations. But the country never got to know any of the men who carried them out, the details of what they did or the impact their work had on them. Most of the missions were highly classified and the men were instructed never to discuss them. Luke Thompson, now retired and disillusioned, decided to break that silence. This is the story of his experiences, a story which opens a window into the Byzantine, rarely viewed world of modern espionage. It is also a story which reduces certain governmental policies to a human scale on which the costs — for individuals and society — can be better fathomed.

Not all of what Thompson claims can be checked against other sources of information. The Government re-

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